CITIZEN SCIENCE:
THEORY AND PRACTICE

Organizing Facilitated Poster Discussion Sessions: Their Inspiration, Planning, and Implementation at the C*Sci2023 Conference

MEETING REPORT

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ABSTRACT

The C*Sci 2023 conference, held by the Association for the Advancement of Participatory Sciences (AAPS; until 2024 known as the Citizen Science Association) in Tempe, Arizona in May 2023, aimed to bring those involved in participatory science together in person for the first time in four years. To respond to feedback from attendees of past AAPS conferences, the conference planning committee developed facilitated discussion sessions along common themes to allow for more opportunity for conversation among poster presenters and participants. In these sessions, poster presenters delivered 2–3-minute talks followed by panel presentations and then small group discussions, primarily using the Conversation Café model.

During the abstract submission process, two-thirds of respondents expressed interest in participating in a session of this type. Ultimately, there were 14 discussion sessions with 61 individual presenters and a facilitator in each. A post-conference survey revealed that while conference attendees were unsure of what to expect prior to these sessions, a majority of respondents felt that these sessions enhanced engagement with posters and provided more meaningful opportunities for actionable takeaways from conversations.

As this was the implementation of a new session type, several challenges were faced from the execution of these sessions. These included facilitator confusion with the model used and inadequate facilitator training, as well as the timing of these sessions during the conference, and difficulty in collecting session notes. This report expands on the development and deployment of these sessions, as well as reflections after their implementation and suggestions for future conferences.

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INTRODUCTION

The Association for the Advancement of Participatory Sciences (AAPS; until 2024 known as the Citizen Science Association) connects people who play a wide range of roles in participatory science, which encompasses citizen science, community science, participatory monitoring, crowd science, and more (Citizen Science Association 2023). Participatory science practitioners include researchers, project managers, evaluators, educators, students, environmental justice leaders, and representatives from facilitator organizations such as libraries and museums who engage with and connect researchers and communities. AAPS is a member-driven organization that connects people from many different experiences around one shared purpose: advancing knowledge through research and monitoring by, for, and with members of the public (Citizen Science Association 2019). The participatory sciences are inherently trans- and inter-disciplinary, bringing together participants from multiple backgrounds, experiences, and skill sets. Therefore, it is particularly important for organizations like AAPS to provide opportunities for members from different disciplines, regions, and roles within projects to engage in meaningful ways.

One of the core roles that AAPS plays within the participatory science community is the hosting of conferences focused on best practices and innovations in participatory sciences. Currently, AAPS holds annual conferences, alternating between a centralized in-person event and a series of virtual and regional events. Broadly speaking, AAPS conferences serve similar roles to conferences held by many academic and professional associations, including intellectual development, networking, connections with existing and new collaborators, and opportunities for collective sensemaking among people with shared interests (e.g., Edelheim et al. 2018; Etzion et al. 2022). These events also play a unique role in connecting science professionals, engagement specialists, funders, app developers, community leaders, and others for deep conversations about strategies for meaningful and impactful public research partnerships.

In 2020, prior to the onset of closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, AAPS surveyed its members to gain insight into what they value from conferences and AAPS events to inform plans for a 2021 event. The results (n = 395 respondents) showed the kinds of conference experiences and activities that were most valuable to members were attending workshops (77.2%), learning about tools and resources (74.9%), learning about ongoing research in participatory sciences (73.4%), and networking opportunities (70.1%). This feedback from members shaped much of the planning and decision-making for future conferences. For the CitSciVirtual 2021 conference, the content focused heavily on workshops, and featured thematic discussion sessions for virtual poster presenters designed to mimic the opportunities to engage with other poster authors at an in-person conference (Hils et al. 2023). The evaluation report developed from the results of the 2021 post-conference survey found that over 80% of respondents wished to see interactive poster sessions offered in future conferences (Fischer and Cho 2021). The C*Sci 2022 virtual conference (which also featured companion in-person regional events) highlighted symposia composed of AAPS member–nominated speakers who spanned a wide range of subject areas, roles, and career stages; provided information-to-action sections focused on skill-building and problem-solving; and offered discussion sessions for virtual poster presenters (https://participatorysciences.org/conferences/c-sci-2022/).

C*Sci 2023 (https://participatorysciences.org/conferences/csci-2023/) was held in Tempe, Arizona, USA at Arizona State University, from May 22–26, 2023, with a small virtual event the week before. There were 434 registrants who delivered 14 oral presentations, 133 posters (87 in person, 46 virtual), 8 workshops, and 20 symposia. The conference was planned by a volunteer program committee (including authors Duncan, Tuttle, and Cawood) and AAPS staff (including author Putnam), and was supported by a conference organizer and local host committee. For C*Sci 2023, the organizers aimed to build on the discussion formats of the prior two virtual conferences, and to take advantage of the opportunity for the community to gather in person for the first time in four years. While C*Sci 2023 included a number of traditional conference session formats (i.e., poster sessions, symposia, workshops, and oral sessions), there was also a concerted effort to include session formats that further stimulated dialogue beyond what has been historically available at AAPS conferences. As part of this effort, the conference planning team implemented a new facilitated poster discussion session format designed to actively engage all participants, including presenters and audience members. Each discussion session had multiple presenters, often from different roles, career stages, and disciplines; a session facilitator to help guide conversations; and opportunities for audience members to share their own experiences, answer questions from each other and from presenters, and engage in group conversations.

The objective of this report is to reflect on the process of developing a facilitated discussion session format designed to encourage sharing and conversation among presenters and audience members. We also provide an assessment of the discussion session implementation at the C*Sci 2023 conference, consider the lessons learned, and provide

recommendations for future events that aim to use a similar format.

THE INTENTION AND PLANNING PROCESS

One aim of AAPS conferences is to foster "conversations across disciplines, roles, and perspectives" (Association for Advancing Participatory Sciences 2023). However, academic and professional association conferences in the United States typically feature two major session types—oral presentations, including keynotes, symposia, and individual talks; and poster sessions. Typically, oral presentations operate with one speaker talking at the audience, and if time permits, a small number of audience members asking short, pointed questions of the speaker at the conclusion. While this model allows for presenters to speak at length on their projects, it limits the depth of discussion that can occur between speakers and the audience. In contrast, poster sessions feature many presenters, often in a large poster hall where the presenters share their work multiple times with individuals or small groups of people. While these interactions can be more in depth, they often are limited in the quantity of people who can engage in each presentation.

While poster discussion sessions during the CitSciVirtual 2021 and C*Sci 2022 conferences allowed poster presenters to participate in moderated small-group sessions, conversation in these sessions was still mostly driven by presenters and moderators and did not provide much opportunity for session participants to interact with the presenters and each other beyond a question-and-answer period. For C*Sci 2023, the conference planning team discussed ways to facilitate in-depth discussions with groups of poster presenters that would enable the participation of all attendees. This resulted in the development of a more structured, facilitated poster discussion session format by a discussion session planning sub-committee. The primary goal for these sessions was to initiate cross-sector conversations around poster presenters. Rather than focusing solely on specific disciplines (e.g., astronomy or ecology), the sessions were primarily focused on the methods, issues, or purposes around which participatory research was conducted. For example, some discussion session topics included "participant engagement," "working with data," and "monitoring." In addition, these discussion sessions helped to bring participants together across sectors (e.g., academic, non-profit, government, and education) to explore common challenges and opportunities across project types.

Planning for these discussion sessions involved first soliciting potential presenters in the abstract submission process. During the abstract submission process, submitters were asked if they were interested in presenting in or leading a discussion session. They also were asked to provide keywords and select from a list of five cross-cutting practices (Building Relationships and Community Trust; Designing for Action and Impact; Integrity in Data Ethics; Practices for Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion; and Strategies for Successful Science), which were formulated by the overarching planning committee prior to the development of the sub-committee. Interest was high, with 115 out of 140 (66%) abstract submitters who were accepted expressing interest in the discussion sessions.

Once abstracts were accepted, the planning team worked together to group abstracts into sessions based on common cross-sector themes, practices, issues, and purposes. While the initial intent was to use the five pre-determined cross-cutting practices to develop groupings, the sub-committee struggled to sort posters into cohesive groups using these categories. Instead, the sub-committee reviewed the abstracts and used an iterative process to identify and group posters around common focal topics expressed by the authors, regardless of scientific discipline.

Three to six presenters, including the facilitator, were grouped per session. Sessions were designed with three main parts:

1. Short "lightning" talks in which each author presented their poster for 2 to 3 minutes. Posters were displayed electronically or were presented using a maximum of three slides via a projector.
2. A 15-minute panel discussion in which the presenters and the audience discussed overarching themes of the presenting projects. Facilitators were instructed to prepare questions such as "What part of your project was most successful?", "What has been your biggest challenge in conducting your project as it relates to the session topic?", and "How can your work be used to advance the field of C*Sci?". Facilitators could also field questions from the audience.
3. Conversation Café–style small-group discussions as described by the Liberating Structures organization (Liberating Structures n.d.a). For this approach, facilitators were instructed to have presenters choose an area of the room and then allow audience members to self-select into groups that had a presenter with whom they wanted to engage in deeper conversation. To ensure the quality of small-group conversations, facilitators were instructed to make sure that groups were not too large or small (approximately 4–8 people

per group). In the Conversation Café model, a "talking object" is used in which each person holds the talking object while speaking. Each person takes a turn to share their thoughts on a topic, then each person shares thoughts on the prior round of comments. Finally, the floor opens to unstructured conversation.

Prior to the conference, facilitators were invited to participate in a training session to learn about the discussion session model. However, facilitators were encouraged to alter the model as they saw fit during their sessions.

IMPLEMENTATION AND IMPACT

The final conference program included 14 discussion sessions with a total of 61 individual presenters. On each of the three conference days, four or five discussion sessions were held, each 75 minutes long, with three to six lightning talks per session, including the session facilitator who led the discussion. The session topics that emerged from the review and synthesis of poster abstracts focused on a range of cross-cutting practices, issues, or purposes within the participatory sciences (Table 1). For instance, two sessions focused on community-building as a practice important in many participatory science projects, one session focused on the issue of integrating participatory science into complex institutions, and one session focused on participatory science for the purpose of understanding and conserving biodiversity. Although attendance numbers for the sessions are not available, a subset of conference attendees used AAPS's online conference platform (AAPS Connect) to RSVP for conference sessions; based on these RSVPs, a median of 14 people expressed interest in each session ("Going" or "Maybe"; minimum 5, maximum 22). Anecdotally, attendance in the sessions ranged from fewer than 10 participants in one session to well over 30 in the largest session.

DAY	SESSION TOPIC	NUMBER OF PRESENTERS
Tuesday	Higher Education	5
	Community-Building I	4
	Monitoring	6
	K–12 Education (educator focused)	4
Wednesday	Policy & Institutional Integration	4
	Community-Building II	5
	Data	4
	Biodiversity	5
	Participant Engagement	5
Thursday	K–12 Education	5
	Sustainability	3
	Health	3
	Partnerships	4
	Technology	4

Table 1 The facilitated discussion session schedule with session topics and number of presenters in each session.

All sessions began with lightning talks that were successful in creating an environment in which poster presenters could present their work as a quick oral presentation. Presenters were able to gather around a common theme, often a practice rather than a discipline. This format also allowed for sharing about a project that was earlier in the development stage or in progress without the need to share results if not yet available. Typically, these presentations took the first 15–30 minutes of the session. Subsequently, individual facilitators varied in how they implemented the sessions. For the group discussion, some facilitators followed the Conversation Café–style format closely (as described previously), while others chose less structured small-group discussions. Figure 1 shows a panel discussion in action during one of the discussion sessions. In most sessions, each small group was led by one of the panel presenters, and participants self-organized roughly equally across the small groups. In at least one session, the facilitator and audience collectively decided to continue a full-group discussion with the panel of presenters for the remainder of the session.

To aid in understanding how discussion session presenters and participants viewed the poster discussion sessions, questions about the discussion sessions were asked as part of the post-conference survey sent to all conference attendees (an IRB exemption was provided by the Smithsonian Institute (HS23033) to use this survey data). The post-conference survey asked respondents to recall and consider how they viewed the facilitated poster discussion sessions both before and after the conference. Based on the survey results for in-person attendees (Table 2), respondents were split on whether they knew what to expect from the facilitated discussion session opportunity at the time of the abstract submission process (38.8% agreed, 24.5% were neutral, and 36.7% disagreed; n = 49). Similarly, some respondents expressed feeling excited about the opportunity to present in a session of this type at the time of the submission process, but a majority of respondents were neutral at that time (37.5% agreed, 56.3% were neutral, and 6.3% disagreed; n = 48). These results are perhaps not surprising for a newly introduced

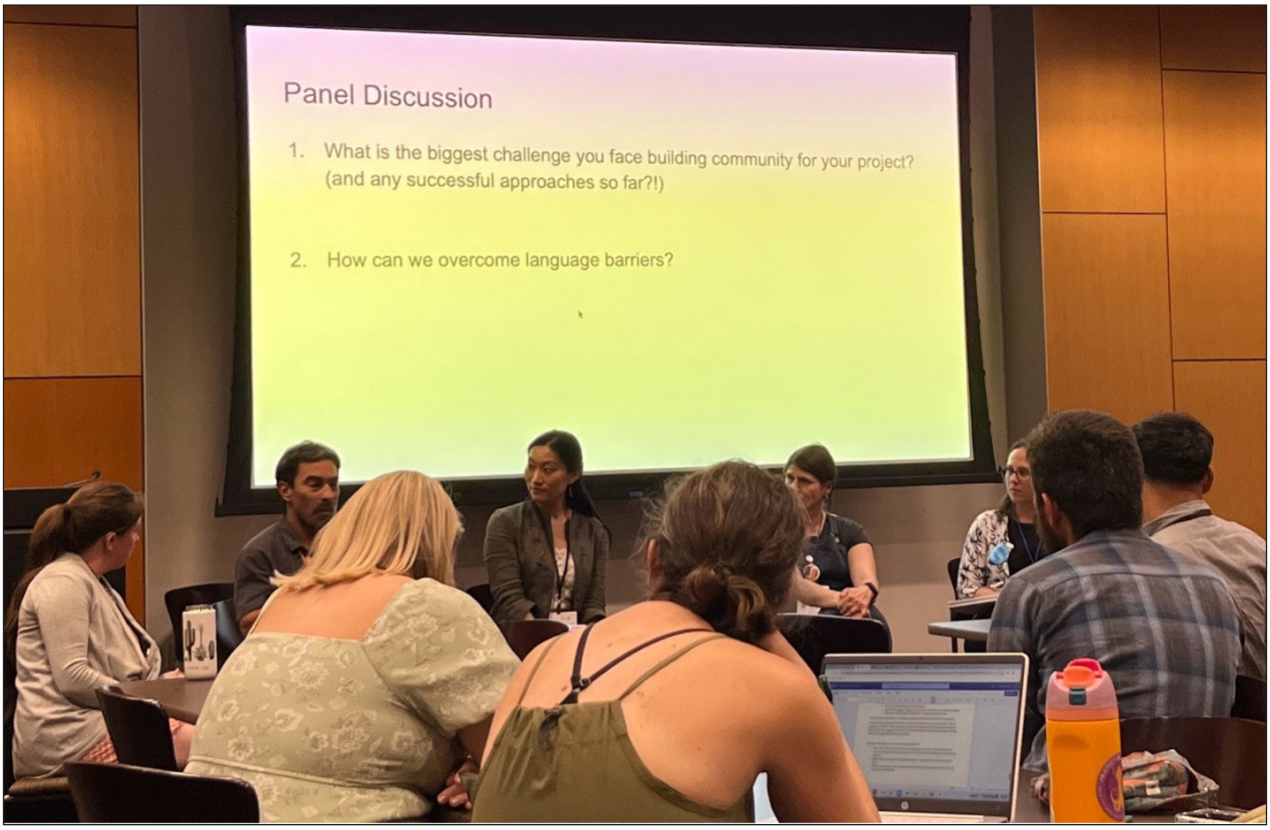

Figure 1 Presenters answer questions in the panel part of a discussion session.

PROMPT	AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE
Based on the abstract submission process, I knew what to expect from the poster/discussion opportunity	38.8% (19 responses)	24.5% (12 responses)	36.7% (18 responses)
Based on the abstract submission process, I was excited about the poster/discussion opportunity	37.5% (18 responses)	56.3% (27 responses)	6.3% (3 responses)
Discussion sessions enhanced engagement in poster content	61.2% (30 responses)	28.6% (14 responses)	10.2% (5 responses)
Posters enhanced engagement in discussion sessions	52% (26 responses)	42% (21 responses)	6% (3 responses)
Based on my experience, I would submit to be a poster presenter in this format in the future	50% (24 responses)	27.1% (13 responses)	22.9% (11 responses)

Table 2 In-person conference attendees' views on the poster discussion sessions from the post-conference survey.

format and the limited information on this format provided at the time of submission. Indeed, the abstract submission process primarily served to gauge interest in this type of session so that the planning committee could consider how best to organize these sessions within the conference program.

While many survey respondents were unsure what to expect from the facilitated discussion sessions at the time of abstract submission, many felt after the fact that these sessions were a mutually beneficial addition to the more traditional poster sessions during the conference. Most respondents agreed that the discussion sessions enhanced engagement in poster content (61.2% agreed, 28.6% were neutral, and 10.2% disagreed; n = 49). Likewise, a majority of those who responded agreed that posters enhanced engagement in discussion sessions (52% agreed, 42% were neutral, and 6% disagreed; n = 50). Some participants conveyed that they were more able to glean actionable takeaways than in other session types and valued the inclusivity and engagement from a broad range of perspectives. Half of those who responded said that based on their experience, they would submit to be a poster presenter in this format in the future (50% agreed, 27.1% were neutral, and 22.9% disagreed; n = 48).

Because discussions were central to many of the session formats at the conference, attendees were asked (via the post-conference survey) to share what, if anything, they found valuable about the event's emphasis on discussions and, more generally, what elements of the conference they would like to see continued, increased, changed, or stopped (n = 54 respondents). In general, responses to open-ended questions regarding the conference program's focus on discussion and interaction were overwhelmingly positive. Specifically, these respondents appreciated the interactive nature of the poster discussion sessions and the opportunity to talk with and learn from people in small groups around shared interests and across diverse backgrounds and experiences. Common themes included appreciating the opportunity to bring people together across several projects with one or more similar characteristics, and learning from others with different experiences and ideas. Respondents also valued the opportunity to network and meet potential future collaborators through these and other discussion sessions.

Some respondents, however, felt the sessions could have been better organized with more clarity about the format or would have preferred less structured sessions, a simpler format, or scheduling discussions earlier in the day. Others felt the discussion sessions repeated content that was available from individual presenters in the actual poster sessions or would have preferred the option to attend a different type of session during this same time slot.

To obtain a deeper understanding of the facilitators' experiences with the discussion sessions, facilitators were invited to provide open-ended feedback in a video chat session or via email (which was also exempt from IRB review via the same Smithsonian Institute approval as above). Facilitators were asked about the types of conversations heard in the sessions, how the session structure supported those conversations, and to provide recommendations for improving the discussion session format in the future. Three of fourteen moderators participated in a feedback discussion by Zoom, and one moderator responded by email. Like responses in the post-conference survey, moderators felt the poster discussion sessions enabled deeper, more specific conversations than the poster sessions alone, including opportunities to problem-solve within small groups and to make connections around common issues, practices, and goals. Moderators appreciated having the flexibility to adapt or change the session format and the amount of structure, depending on group size in the session, preferences of the moderator and participants, and other factors. Suggestions for improvement included providing several options for the session format, providing more advance preparation or training for moderators in how the format works, ensuring that presenters upload their slides in advance of the conference, and designating separate facilitators who are not also presenters in the session.

LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE CONFERENCES

As this was the first time offering facilitated discussion sessions at a conference hosted by AAPS, many lessons were learned from their implementation and from feedback from participants and facilitators after the conference. As previously alluded to, challenges included difficulty and confusion in session facilitation, insufficient facilitator guidance, and dissatisfaction with timing. The sub-committee also were often unsuccessful in gathering notes from facilitators in each session. Table 3 provides proposed solutions to these challenges and the text below expands on how these solutions might be further developed and implemented, particularly how these sessions can be better facilitated.

After the lightning talks, the quality and structure of these sessions varied significantly. As expressed above, some facilitators deviated from the Conversation Café model. A major lesson learned was that the Conversation Café model necessitated more structure than was required to meet the goals of the discussion

CHALLENGE	PROPOSED SOLUTION
Confusion and inconsistencies with facilitation	Explore other models such as: • What, So What, Now What? W³ • Fishbowl model • University models of structured discussions Assign a facilitator for each session who is not also a presenter
Inadequate facilitator training	Develop a cohesive guidance document and offer virtual training for facilitators
Timing of discussion sessions	Schedule discussion sessions earlier in the day or interspersed with other session types
Collecting session notes	Develop a Google or Microsoft form for facilitators to report on each session

Table 3 Four challenges and their accompanying proposed solutions for future conferences.

sessions for an AAPS conference. This model was developed for more emotionally charged conversations such as those about race, politics, or a major change in an organization (Liberating Structures n.d.a). In this case, conference attendees tended to self-select into sessions in which they were directly involved or interested in the topic. Conversations were less impassioned and were more about sharing and learning from each other to become better researchers and practitioners. Rather than facilitating conversation, sometimes the Conversation Café model fragmented it.

Another model that may serve presenters and participants at these types of discussion sessions is the What, So What, Now What? W³ model also described in Liberating Structures (Liberating Structures n.d.b). Under this model, participants converge on the three questions: What? So What? Now What? Applied to these discussion sessions, participants can be prompted during the sessions to think about "What?" Such as: "What was interesting to you?", "What do you want to learn more about?", "What insights might you be able to share?". Using these answers, participants can then self-select into small groups (4-8 people) around a particular poster presenter. In the "So What?" phase, small groups can identify patterns in the presentations and dive deeper as driven by a particular topic determined by the facilitator or the poster presenter. Questions in this stage can include: "What patterns emerged in the presentation as they relate to participatory research?", and "What hypotheses can we make about why something worked or didn't work in the project?". The "Now What?" phase is likely to be the most consequential of the phases for both presenters and the audience. In this phase, the conversation is driven by discussions about what should be done in the future. Presenters and participants can discuss ideas to improve projects or address challenges. Collaborations may emerge during this time among various parties. In our analysis, we found that facilitators and participants often benefitted from problem solving and brainstorming during the discussion sessions, and a model such as this one can help to further facilitate those types of discussions.

Other models that may be of use include the fishbowl model, structured discussion sessions that are often employed in university classrooms, or even providing wide liberty for facilitators to choose their own model. The fishbowl model utilizes a small group of people (typically 3-5) who sit in the middle of the room and engage in conversation about a topic while the remainder of the participants sit in a concentric circle around the small group and ask questions (Liberating Structures, n.d.c). This model was employed at least once during these discussion sessions and at other types of sessions at C*Sci 2023; we received feedback that this was a valuable model to use. Alternatively, many universities have teaching and learning centers that provide guidelines for leading discussion sessions. For example, the Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning at Yale University describes how to ask engaging questions and foster participation (Yale Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning 2015). Perhaps inviting poster presenters or chosen facilitators to organize their own discussion sessions can allow facilitators to play to their strengths as academics, researchers, and community organizers. By nature of the AAPS organization and its yearly conference, many of the conference attendees are involved in community work and have developed tried-and-true methods that work well with their leadership styles. Once a model or path is chosen, more clear guidelines should be provided by the conference committee including additional trainings and easy-to-follow documentation. With this, the committee can then ensure that these discussion sessions are truly participatory in line with the values of the organization.

Finally, some other elements to consider when designing and organizing these types of sessions include: offering discussion sessions in the morning when participants are more alert and engaged, interspersing these sessions with other types of sessions in the same time slot so that attendees can choose a different type, simplifying and clarifying the purpose and format of the discussion sessions such that facilitators are better prepared and participants are more aware of the purpose, developing sessions so that facilitators are not also presenters, and improving communication about the different session types to connect the program elements. In addition, designing and deploying a digital form (such as a Google or Microsoft form) for facilitators to report back on outcomes after each session will aid in gathering vital information gleaned from the discussions. Finally, developing a more specific post-conference or post-session survey before the conference and asking participants/conference attendees for their responses immediately after sessions or immediately after the conference would allow for more pointed feedback to continue to improve this model.

CONCLUSION

The community encompassed by AAPS is one that values and benefits from opportunities to more deeply engage with others involved in this work. It was clear from feedback from past conferences that attendees would appreciate

the further development of discussion-type sessions, which led to the formation of facilitated discussion sessions at the C*Sci 2023 conference. Although the implementation of these sessions was not flawless, feedback shows that they were highly beneficial for conference attendees, and that their presence at future AAPS conferences is warranted. We recommend that future AAPS conference committees include facilitated discussion sessions in their conference offerings and consider the lessons learned and suggestions herein in their planning—future AAPS conferences will be better for it.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

Beyond the aggregated data shared herein, we are not able to share individual data with the public.

ETHICS AND CONSENT

An exemption was provided by the Smithsonian Institute (HS23033) to use the CSci 2023 survey data and the interview data provided herein.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Sara Duncan was primarily responsible for writing the Abstract, The Intention and Planning Process, and Lessons Learned and Recommendations for Future Conferences sections. Alison Cawood was primarily responsible for writing the Introduction section. Julie Tuttle was primarily responsible for analyzing survey and focus group data and writing the Implementation and Impact section. Sara primarily oversaw the conception and design as well as ensured cohesiveness of the manuscript. Reanna Putnam provided substantial insight into AAPS activities and C*Sci 2023 conference data, and provided significant feedback on manuscript text.

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